Richard Dubé's *The Haven – A True Story of Life in the Hole*

Reviewed by Meredith Egan

The Haven – A True Story of Life in the Hole is one man's recounting of his experiences as a prisoner in Canada, with some recollections of his life prior to his incarceration. In particular, Dubé describes in detail his treatment during time spent in solitary confinement in Millhaven Institution, a maximum-security federal penitentiary just outside of Kingston, Ontario.

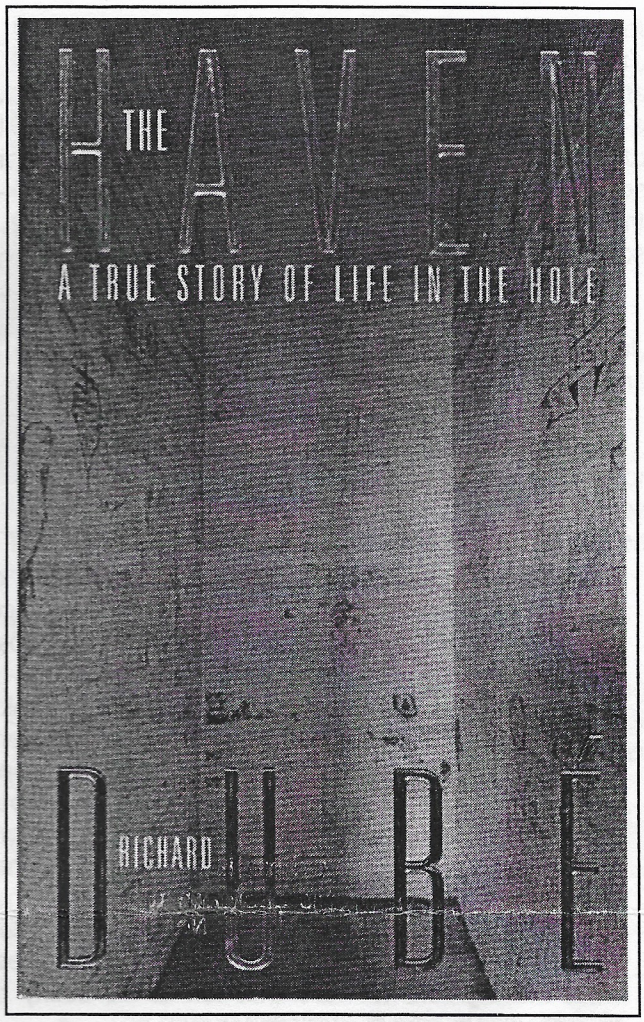
The experience of reading The Haven at times felt like an interesting metaphor for his experiences in federal prisons in Canada, as he recounted them, and as I understand them through hearing others' similar experiences.

The book is an intertwining of different times in Richard's life; he moves jarringly quickly from a 'current' narrative to recounting his history. He muses about how best to effect revenge upon those players in the legal system who carry out his arrest, the legal proceedings surrounding his case, and his incarceration; people who we as taxpayers hire to 'do our justice' for us. The story is graphic, violent, and at times very confusing, which are words that have often been used to describe people's experiences of the legal and penal system in Canada.

For readers who have had little exposure to the culture and experience of being criminalized and incarcerated in Canada, this book may shock at a surface level because of the language used, and images of the terror-filled life and imaginings of Richard Dubé. When contemplated more deeply, it shocks at a much more fundamental level, and should prompt readers to consider the question: how can we, as a society, continue to support punishment as a paradigm in justice, when every study undertaken has shown that, in the words of Gandhi, you can not overcome hate with more hate; only love can overcome hate. Continuing to brutalize prisoners in the name of 'justice' makes no sense, and is expensive. In more practical ways, to meet pain with pain in some bizarre balancing act of 'proportionality' only serves to perpetuate a state of hurt, and can not lead to healing, learning or 'rehabilitation' for those we label 'victim' or 'offender' (even though we are all both victims and offenders).

William Penn calls us to examine our actions, when in his collected works he says

"A good end cannot sanctify evil means; nor must we ever do evil, that good may come of it... It is as great presumption to send our passions upon God's errands, as it is to palliate them with God's name...We are too ready to retaliate, rather than



forgive, or gain by love and information. And yet we could hurt no man that we believe loves us. Let us try then what Love will do: for if men did once see we love them, we should soon find they would not harm us. Force may subdue, but Love gains: and he that forgives first, wins the laurel." (William Penn 1693; as quoted in Quaker Faith and Practice, 24.03)

Penn challenges Friends to be creative and imaginative in our practices and in our discernment of God's will. He is, in a broad sense, inviting us to consider working to create 'earth as it is in heaven'. In the ongoing creation of justice, I believe, we are called to contemplate 'Divine Grace', and how we can, through our lives, bear witness to our understanding of this grace.

Dubé's book reminds me of the importance of recognizing the fear, shame and pain that underlies violence. It encourages me to consciously choose to unconditionally meet that shame, pain and fear with love, understanding and forgiveness (as an imperfect mirror of my understanding of grace) rather than judgment, manipulation or 'the answers'.

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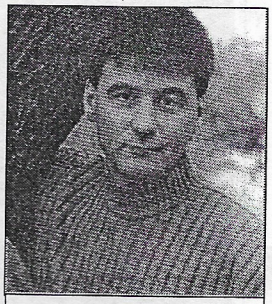
As someone with a passion for a restorative approach to human encounter, I was frustrated with what I came to consider 'the untold story' of Richard Dubé. His passionate and vicious desire to perpetuate pain on his captors is thematic within the story (and understandable when framed within the context of the brutality he experiences). His time in 'the hole', and his obviously high intellect allow him to engage in the mental 'exercise' of strategizing a complex, hate-filled plan to mutilate, torture, and heap pain (in a multitude of evolving ways) upon those who we ask to 'do justice' on our behalf. (Oh how we create 'ungrace' for those who we hire to do our hard work!)



Richard Dubé

And yet, the author's profile in the book's notes tells us that Richard is now living in Southern Ontario, receiving a post-secondary education and working with high risk youth who are in tremendous pain, working against addictions and incarceration. He has apparently transcended the pain that individuals and society have heaped upon him! What a miracle to be celebrated! However, we do not read of this transformation; we cannot even begin to guess what the ingredients were that led to his ability to transcend. Oh how frustrating for me!

The gift of this book has been, for me, the opportunity to experience a common occurrence in a prison environment: a 'paper review'. Throughout the 'correctional system', staff of institutions, the parole board and the 'reintegration' system are asked (due to a lack of resources, systems created for economic and political reasons, liability issues and other reasons) to 'assess' prisoners or situations based solely on 'paper files' created and maintained about people or incidents. Relationships are not valued, and are often pathologized within the penal system (particularly the prisoner-volunteer relationships). Reading this book I felt like I was trying to do a 'paper review' on the life of Dubé; what worked? What helped him change? Can I find evidence that will give me a clue as to what will work with others?

How arrogant of me to consider that somehow I will truly get to know the complexity of Richard Dubé and the many layers and facets of his story solely by reading his book. To understand his transforming circumstances, I must be willing to wait until he chooses to tell that story, or I must be willing to engage in the complex and onerous task of building relationship with him; from that relationship may come the richness of understanding the story of how one man rose from a situation of rage, pain and violence to the desire to live a life of compassion, caring and service. That is not the story he chose to tell (even though it would have served MY purposes more fully), and I am grateful for the story he does tell, and the rich learning I received both from reading it and from spending some small amount of time contemplating what it means to me in my life. Thank you, Richard.

I know it was vastly more difficult to live the experience than it was for me to read your retelling (and at times it was very difficult to read), with my intentionally cultivated naïveté and pacifist sensibilities. This book is a gift to me, and perhaps even more so to the many more people who are not honoured with the opportunity to hear similar stories firsthand. Of this they may be reassured: Richard Dubé's story, as I read it, is not in my experience particularly uncommon, nor more intense than many I have heard. As Quakers, what are we called to do to challenge a system that perpetuates such hate and pain? What sayest thou?

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